



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

2nd Sunday of Christmas - January 3, 2021

Sermon Title: "Seeing God"

Gospel Text: John 1:10-18

We're approaching the end of the twelve days of Christmas, and I confess I'll be sorry to see the season go. In these times of ours, filled with quarantines, facemasks, and depressing news, the visual splendor of Christmas has given me joy and comfort. The bright lights, trees, and tinsel have been signposts of hope and the promise of better times to come. I will miss the Christmas decorations when they go back into storage.

Given the very *visual* nature of Christmas, it was a little jarring to me that in today's Gospel, John states that "no one has ever seen God." As far as I can tell, John is right. *I've* not seen the literal face of God, and I don't know *anybody* who has. John's statement is consistent with the Biblical record as well. Even the greatest prophets – people like Moses, Elijah, and Jacob - encountered God not face-to-face but through other means, like a burning bush, sheer silence, or a wrestling angel.¹

On the one hand, this is strangely comforting to me, because a God who is *too* familiar and approachable doesn't strike me as a God worthy of our worship. A god I can easily understand and measure seems more likely to me to be a *projection* – a means of *self-worship* – and not something truly transcendent, powerful, all-knowing, and trustworthy. And it makes sense to me that a God who is pure love and light, as we profess *our* God to be, would be more than my eyes, heart, and mind would be able to handle. Indeed, in Exodus 33:20, God warns that a mere mortal cannot see God's face and live.

But on the other hand, I also recognize that an invisible and unknowable god is something that might just be a story, a myth, a clever ruse. That's a critique many atheists level at Christianity. And indeed, history is full of conmen who invented gods and religions because it's an easy way to separate people from their money. There's nothing wrong with a little skepticism. And so if I can't see God face-to-face, I'd at least like to see God's shadow or God's reflection.

As I was pondering all this, I remembered some large family photographs from the turn of the century. I used to see them in my grandmother's hallway, and then at my mom's house after she inherited them. One photograph was of my great-grandfather, Charles Zerbe, when he was a young man; the other was of his wife Maude, as a young woman. They lived good, long lives; she died in 1936 and he passed in 1937. I never met either of them. But as I used to study those old sepia portraits, I could see myself in the face of Charles. And Maude's face bore a striking resemblance to my mother's face. Once I made that connection, I found that whenever I looked in the mirror or saw my mother, I was drawn a little closer to my great grandparents, even

though we never saw each other in this world. That connection has always felt like such a surprising little blessing in my life.

We are material people – people of flesh and blood – people who need tangible things like old photos to establish heartfelt connections. And so even though no one has seen the face of God, God has provided ways for us to connect with the divine. The most important way of course is through Jesus. The apostle Paul refers to Jesus as an icon or image of God.² John’s Gospel states that Jesus was present “in the beginning,” at the creation of creation.³ Often the pre-incarnation Jesus is referred to as “Wisdom,” as we see in two of today’s lessons.⁴ The Nicene Creed brings all this together as we profess our faith in Jesus as “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.”⁵

In the paintings and icons of Jesus we *see* and in the scripture stories of Jesus we *read*, we are *encountering* and, in a way, *seeing* God. This encounter becomes even more intimate during Holy Communion. As Lutherans, we hold to the beliefs of the ancient Church, as set forth in the Bible, that in Holy Communion the wheat and wine mystically become the true body and blood of Jesus.⁶ That is an experience *beyond* mere seeing. It is an act of union, mercy, and love that testifies of the astonishing affection our God has for us.

But perhaps even more astonishing is the assertion made in the book of Genesis that *we* – *humankind* – are made in the image of God.⁷ Think about what *that* means. It’s a little like those old photographs of my great-grandparents. When you look into the eyes of another human being, you are seeing an image of God in them. How quickly we forget this. I can’t help but think that we would treat each other more kindly if we could keep this eternal truth in mind. I’m always haunted by something the 20th century writer and social activist Dorothy Day once said: “I really only love God as much as the person I love the least.”

But remember, if God’s image is in your *neighbor*, God’s image is also in *you*. I want you to remember that when you’re tempted to think that you’re worthless or good for nothing. Yes, because of sin we are all flawed and all make mistakes. But at our very core, each of us carry the image of God within us, which says volumes about the priceless treasure that you really are.

As Christians though it’s not enough for us to merely *carry* that image within us. God calls us to *share* it widely, freely, and abundantly. Listen to what Martin Luther had to say about that: “[A]s our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.”⁸

Isn’t that a beautiful vision of what the Christian Church in general and Grace Lutheran in particular should be? It’s a vision of the Church’s people being little Christs to a hurting world as they each bear God’s image in service to our neighbors to demonstrate that in God’s face we see mercy and love. *That’s* the kind of Church the world needs. *That’s* the kind of Church I want to be part of.

Of course that's exactly the opposite of what the adversary wants. And so the tempter tells us that we can't be little Christs in service to the world because we aren't *good enough* or *gifted enough*. But that's a lie. It's nonsense. Here's how Luther explains it:

“Christ and the Christians become... one body, so that the Christian can bear good fruit... For when a Christian baptizes, preaches, consoles, exhorts, works, and suffers, he does not do this as... [a mere person]; it is Christ who does this in him. The lips and tongue with which he proclaims and confesses God's Word are not his; they are Christ's lips and tongue. The hands with which he toils and serves his neighbor are the hands and members of Christ, who... is in him; and he is in Christ.”⁹

So, you see, we have *everything* we need to not only *see* God ourselves, but to *be* an image of God to a world that in this new year desperately needs that blessing. Just imagine the difference a place like Grace Lutheran could make if all of our members decided to be little Christs in 2021. The light that would result would be brighter than *any* Christmas tree. In fact, I think *every day* would feel like Christmas. Amen.

Citations:

¹ See Exodus 3, 1 Kings 19, and Genesis 32.

² 2 Cor. 4:4

³ John 1:1-4

⁴ Sirach 24:1-12; Wisdom of Solomon 10:15-21

⁵ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 104

⁶ See John 6 and *Luther's Small Catechism*, The Sacrament of the Altar

⁷ Genesis 1:26-27

⁸ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, pp. 367–368.

⁹ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 24, p. 226